

BOOK REVIEWS

Tony Byrne. *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade*.
Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997, 198 pp, ISBN 185607 2010

Airlift to Biafra is an important addition to the growing list of books on the Nigerian Civil War written by the chief players in the humanitarian sector themselves. As a Danish photographer put it in 1968, if any one man could be said to be the originator of the Airlift to Biafra, that man would be Tony Byrne. As often happens when any literary work is on the drawing board, one has to make the decision either to please the masses or the experts. *Airlift to Biafra* is an option for the former. It is written in the form of a novel without footnotes and references to archival materials. This omission may be disappointing to researchers who may have historiographical needs for these essential scholarly tools. Yet, the book in its entirety is an invaluable primary source for having come from a major player in the events it describes.

The story is cast on a brilliant plot with plenty of humour. The narrative has the hallmarks of mission romanticism, which, over the centuries, has assiduously popularised a successful, literary form the *lettres edifiantes et curieuses*. The first chapter, "Too Hot for Pyjamas," in particular, is faithful to this tradition. In it one finds both elements, depending on what is uppermost in one's search for information, the absolutely edifying or the banally curious. It is a chapter that describes the years the author spent in Eastern Nigeria as a missionary, during which he came to a sincere appreciation of Igbo people and culture, "learning and sharing experiences in friendship and mutual respect" (p.22). This important training and transformation helped him to stand firmly by the people during the tragic and momentous years of the civil war. It helped him to combine his resolve to save lives with his often-scornful attitude towards the peoples' political aspirations. He is thus able to describe the legendary relief pilot, Count von Rosen, who was breaking the rules for exactly the

same reason as he did, as “a victim of Biafran war propaganda” (p.127). The next eight chapters describe the eighteen months airlift from its inception to the fall of Biafra and the expulsion of the foreign missionaries. The epilogue is a brief discussion of the aftermath of the humanitarian intervention, issues like the expulsion of the missionaries, the Africanization of the Nigerian church, and the impact of Biafra on modern relief organisations.

The attitude of the local church in Nigeria towards some tragic events in the civil war does not emerge from the book. More study needs to be done to determine, for instance, whether the church on the Nigerian side did enough to stop the genocide by starvation going on in the secessionist enclave, or why there was no official church statement or condemnation regarding the expulsion of more than two-thirds of the entire foreign missionary personnel in Nigeria after the war. As the author rightly points out, only one powerful church voice was raised against the appalling condemnation, imprisonment and expulsion of the Catholic missionaries—that of an Anglican church leader, Bishop Cockin (p.172f).

What is borne out very clearly in the book is the ambivalence that characterised the entire humanitarian intervention in the Nigerian civil war. This is an issue which is certainly going to dominate historical debate for many decades to come. On the one hand, it was the Vatican, which led a coalition of all church relief organisations in the world in a coercive breach from the air of the sovereignty of an independent nation. On the other, it was Vatican diplomacy that stood firmly against any attempt to turn the humanitarian programme into a political movement. It regarded, for instance, the use of parachutes to drop relief aid as “quasi-military equipment” (p. 16) and therefore forbade their deployment in the relief operation. This ambivalence seems to haunt the author all along his narrative. He calls the notorious gunrunner in the service of both the Biafran government and the church relief organisations the seemingly harmless name Dutting, instead of Wharton, the name by which everyone knows him. This may be the author’s way of sounding non-political, but it does not answer the tricky question of where

humanitarian intervention ends and political involvement begins. At the end of the war, Msg. Bayer, the Secretary General of Caritas Internationalis, was fired by the Vatican Secretary of State for actions embarrassing to the Holy See. In the book, the author lets Bayer describe his fate in words that bear out the church's dilemma: "If we do anything, we're blamed and if we do nothing, I think we deserve to be blamed. Personally, I always preferred to be blamed for at least trying to do the right thing" (p.166).

In the main, *Airlift to Biafra* is a one-sided account of a very complex event: the author writes almost exclusively from personal experience and involvement. The operation to fly in relief materials into the Biafran enclave from the island of Sao Tome was carried out by Joint Church Aid, a confederation of some 35 church and non-church relief organisations. Some of these individual organisations like Nordchurchaid, German Caritas, the American Catholic Relief Service, to mention just a few, made immense contributions in men and materials to the airlift project. These contributions have received only perfunctory treatment in the book that is if they are treated at all. Nonetheless, *Airlift to Biafra* is a most valuable contribution to the history of a phenomenal event. Anyone wanting to know the place of Biafra in modern relief efforts, the traumatic psychological state of blockaded and besieged people and their beloved white missionary helpers, the indomitable spirit of the relief pilots and a classical example of the church's social ministry in its relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, *Airlift to Biafra* is certainly a book to read.

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